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ABSTRACT

The United States has established 8 goals for schools to reach by the year 2000. Ways in which school can prepare for the first goal--"By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn"--are explored in this booklet. It discusses different aspects of children's readiness and what schools can do to prepare for children. The focus is on the 10 keys to ready schools. These include smoothing the transition between home and school; striving for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools; helping children learn and make sense of their world through curriculum, instruction, and other methods; being committed to the success of every child, especially when dealing with poverty and race; being committed to the success of every teacher and every adult interacting with children at school; introducing or expanding approaches that raise achievement, including prompt interventions and flexible approaches; altering practices and programs if they do not benefit children through the use of retention, redshirting, and other means; serving children in communities; taking responsibility for results; and exhibiting strong leadership. The text includes a list of questions for each of these key approaches so as to help schools gauge their progress. (RJM)

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READY SCHOOLS

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February 1998

READY SCHOOLS

A report of the Goal 1 Ready Schools Resource Group
by Rima Shore.

Goal 1: Ready to Learn

By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

Objectives:

- All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.
- Every parent in the United States will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping such parent's preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support parents need.
- Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn, and the number of low-birthweight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.

Dedicated to
the memory of Ernest L. Boyer,
who contributed significantly to
the work of the National Education Goals Panel and
the education of America's young children.

Part I. Ready Schools

To the National Education Goals Panel, ensuring that children start school ready to learn is vitally important. But ensuring that schools are ready for children is important as well. Recognizing that good education means both ready children and ready schools, the Goals Panel convened a special group of advisors and asked them to identify what makes a ready school. This report, Ready Schools, is the result of their efforts. It recommends ten specific approaches found in successful elementary schools and documented by research to be keys to ready schools.

Some four million children enter our nation's kindergartens each year. All of them have, as their birthright, an active curiosity and a capacity to learn. Virtually all of them come to school with a lively intellect that, under the right conditions, can be supported, strengthened, and developed so that they can grasp essential skills and knowledge taught in school and make sense of their world. Readiness to learn continuously, to adapt to change, and to construct meaning would seem to be a natural endowment—the hallmark of human experience. And yet, concern in our nation about this capacity is so intense and so widespread that the first of our National Education Goals seeks to ensure that all of our children will enter school "ready to learn."

Focus on Children's Readiness

Among those expressing the deepest concern are the people who know the children best. Many parents fear that their children are starting school unprepared for the tasks that await them. Kindergarten teachers are also concerned, telling researchers that a significant number of the children entering elementary school are not ready to learn in their classrooms. In different studies, estimates range from 10 percent to more than 30 percent.[1]

In 1990, the President and state Governors reflected these concerns by setting as the first National Education Goal that: "By the year 2000, all children in America

will start school ready to learn." They established a National Education Goals Panel to measure progress toward this and the other National Education Goals. The Goals Panel convened distinguished early childhood leaders from across the country to help the Panel identify how it would define "ready children," and the qualities it would seek in selecting data to measure progress toward Goal 1.

Though some in the past defined "readiness" primarily as readiness to learn to read, the prevailing view today, endorsed by the National Education Goals Panel, is that readiness to learn hinges on a range of factors, including a child's health and physical development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language and communicative skills; and cognition and general knowledge. Efforts to improve school readiness, therefore, begin long before children enroll in kindergarten. They begin with efforts to support families, educate parents, expand access to health care, and raise the quality of early care and education. Getting all children to start—and continue—school "ready to learn" is a shared responsibility of all adults and institutions in a community.

But acknowledging our shared responsibilities to ready children for school does not also let elementary schools off the hook to make themselves ready for children. In fact, to a greater extent than ever before, elementary school leaders are *on the hook*. School leaders are being asked to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning that goes on in their classrooms, as well as to build bridges over the moats that too often have separated schools from the other places where early learning takes place: the home, a wide range of out-of-home early care and education settings, and the community. The Goals Panel recognizes that strengthening achievement requires not only getting children ready for school, but also getting schools ready for the particular children they serve.

Getting Schools Ready for Children

The Goals Panel therefore convened advisors to form a Ready Schools Resource Group and asked them to delineate the essential attributes of a "ready school." While other efforts are now under way to determine how we can better prepare *young children* to enter our schools, this report asks: How can we prepare *schools* to receive our children? How can we make sure that schools are ready for the children and families who are counting on them? And how can we create schools that consistently raise student achievement to levels of excellence?

This report suggests broad strategies that school and community leaders may want to consider as they work to strengthen the transition to school and learning in kindergarten through Grade 3. Although it does not represent a full review of research or practice in this vast field, the report builds upon a body of work that has already been done.

A number of efforts deserve mention. Two reports by the National Association of State Boards of Education provided a framework for group discussion of key issues in early childhood education: *Right from the Start: The Report of the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education*,[2] and *Caring Communities: Supporting Young Children and Families*.[3] Ernest Boyer's *The Basic School* identified key elements of effective elementary schools.[4] Boyer described a community that has a defined mission and purpose, where teachers are leaders and parents are partners, where the curriculum meets children's needs and provides coherence, and where the climate fosters learning and character development. The Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades issued a report called *Years of Promise: A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America's Children*, which articulates cross-cutting principles that schools and other institutions can follow to strengthen both early care and education and schooling in the primary grades.[5] *It's Elementary*, a report on the elementary grades by the California Department of Education, also outlined what an outstanding elementary school might look like and made recommendations for realizing that vision.[6]

This report reflects discussion by the Ready Schools Resource Group of the approaches that a variety of effective schools already use to get their children off to a good start. Many kinds of schools—with diverse philosophies, aims, and approaches—effectively challenge and serve the children who enter them. In some communities, adopting such practices will take more aggressive change efforts than in others, but all ready schools recognize the unique needs of young children and aim to optimize their development and learning.

The discussions that led to this report reflected a shared conviction that schools alone cannot produce students who meet world-class standards; parents and communities share responsibility for this as well. But schools have a bottom-line responsibility for helping children succeed. Working together, all who shape education policy or work in classrooms need to serve every child who comes to school. Their success is our collective responsibility.

The Goal 1 Ready Schools Resource Group suggests ten key principles that communities can take into account as they prepare schools to receive their children.

Part II. Ten Keys to Ready Schools

The ten keys to Ready Schools reflect the major themes and directions discussed by the Goal 1 Ready Schools Resource Group. They suggest concrete policies and strategies that schools can introduce or expand, in order to create learning climates for young children from preschool through Grade 3. They suggest principles to help every child grow in competence and meet high expectations.

Ten Keys to Ready Schools

1. Ready schools smooth the transition between home and school.

2. Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.

3. Ready schools help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world.

4. Ready schools are committed to the success of every child.

5. Ready schools are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day.

6. Ready schools introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement.

7. Ready schools are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children.

8. Ready schools serve children in communities.

9. Ready schools take responsibility for results.

10. Ready schools have strong leadership.

1. Ready schools smooth the transition between home and school.

Ready schools pay attention to the transitions that children and their parents make as they move from the familiar home setting to the public school classroom, and from preschool or child care to kindergarten. For many, these passages are exhilarating; for others, they are treacherous. For children who have spent their first five years at home, the demands of becoming a group member, sharing the teacher's attention, and spending long stretches away from home are new and challenging. For others, going to school means negotiating unfamiliar linguistic and cultural terrain. The cultural divide between home and school is obvious for children who are not native speakers of English. In many instances, children from low-income and minority families must also bridge a cultural gap as they move from home to school. For all these children, the initial transition from home to school can be stressful, and how it takes place matters a great deal.

Schools can work throughout the year to narrow the gap between the culture of the home and the culture of the school by working closely with parents and community organizations; getting to know children in the multiple contexts of their day-to-day lives; creating curricula sensitive to the children's daily experience; and making use of curricula and pedagogy to celebrate the oral traditions that are valued in their communities.

But everyone can benefit from practices that ease the transition. Because children fare better in school when the welcome begins before the bell rings for the first time, some districts and schools reach out to local families well before the children reach age five. In written or personal communications, such districts and schools may suggest steps that parents can take in the first years of life to ensure that their children will get off to a strong, healthy start.

Many schools have found that home visits by teachers or principals before children enter school have a substantial impact on kindergartners' adjustment to their new setting. Lively and reassuring orientation sessions for parents and children are also helpful, and should take into account families' linguistic and cultural characteristics. Invitations should make it clear that both mothers and fathers, as well as other interested family members, are encouraged to attend. Orientation programs should allow plenty of time for question-and-answer sessions.

When the first day of school arrives, ready schools extend a warm welcome to every child and family. This means meeting children and their parents (or other caregivers) at the door, creating the kind of environment that will make them want to cross the threshold, and conveying the expectation that Stephanie or Jamal will be secure, happy, and successful in this environment. Of course, no single action will do away completely with the natural apprehension that is so common on the first day of kindergarten; after all, nervous excitement is part of the experience. But a personal welcome sends the early and memorable message

To help local parents get their children ready for kindergarten, leaders can:

1. Encourage parents to read to their children, starting in the earliest years, and then to take them to the library to pick out their own books and attend special programs for young children there.

2. Help parents connect with voluntary local parent education courses, such as Parents as Teachers, HIPPY, and Family Literacy Programs, that help parents develop language and preliteracy skills in their young children.

3. Encourage parents to take their children for regular visits to the doctor and for immunizations.

4. Urge local pediatricians to use periodic check-ups to "prescribe reading" and to model effective parenting techniques.

5. Help parents find high-quality early care and education programs.

6. Take part in efforts to ensure that all child care centers in the area become accredited.

7. Encourage parents to get early assistance for children with disabilities and developmental delays so they may receive the special services to which they are entitled in order to help them be ready for school.

8. Support programs that help teen parents finish school and learn parenting skills.

that in this place, this child will be accepted, known, and valued. The warm welcome must not be limited to the first day. Parents need to know that they have a standing invitation to visit the school and to spend blocks of time in their children's classrooms.

Despite research showing their importance, transition activities like these remain the exception rather than the rule in our public schools. According to a national study, nearly half of our elementary schools have no formal program for school visitation by the parents of incoming kindergartners. Only one in five of the nation's school districts reports a wide range of transition activities.[7] Schools rarely take advantage of more than a few of the many possible strategies aimed at helping children and families make a good initial adjustment.

2. Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.

Today, most young children experience some kind of out-of-home care before entering kindergarten, often beginning before their first birthdays. More than half of all 3- to 5-year-olds attend some kind of preschool program.[9] Only a few weeks or months separate the preschooler from the kindergartner. In that short span, children's developmental needs do not change radically, but the kindergarten classrooms in which they receive care and education may differ dramatically from the settings to which they have grown accustomed. Children often have difficulty adjusting to classrooms where the rules and routines, atmosphere, or philosophy differs dramatically from those of their familiar child-care setting. In particular, children may find it difficult to adjust to a change in teachers' expectations and styles of interacting.

A growing body of research suggests that today's kindergartens are becoming more narrowly focused on academic goals—a trend that can make the transition from preschool to kindergarten even bumpier.[9] Aware of this trend, some providers of early care and education are strengthening their efforts to help their children gain the skills they will need to succeed in elementary schools, and such providers are assessing children's readiness in more systematic ways. Some of these efforts have had positive results, as measured by cognitive gains. But in many cases, these gains do not translate into successful adjustments to kindergarten. And many early intervention programs have found that participants' impressive initial gains, especially cognitive gains, fade as they move through the primary grades. This drop-off may be attributed, at least in part, to dramatic differences between parent involvement, classroom organization, and teaching style in early care and education programs and in elementary schools.[10]

Elementary schools can help to ease the transition to kindergarten by forging links with the community, their feeder preschools, local Head Start programs, and all of the other settings where their kindergartners have spent their days, and by drawing on the best practices of early childhood centers. Clearly, the goal is not to replicate the child's preschool experience—especially in light of the fact that quality is so elusive in many early care and education settings. But contact with previous caregivers can facilitate planning for individual students, provide a sense of continuity for children and parents, and allow a better alignment of philosophy, expectations, and curriculum across institutions and the community.

Like other principles highlighted in this report, ensuring continuity is not a new idea. In the past, large-scale efforts such as Follow Through and Project Developmental Continuity were introduced to increase continuity and to help infuse the positive aspects of early childhood programs into the primary grades.[11] Over the past decade, the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families

launched a National Initiative on Transition from Preschool to Elementary School, and a number of state-level transition efforts have been introduced. New tools have been designed to help classroom teachers benefit from the knowledge of parents and other educators who already know the child well.[12] At the same time, some early childhood programs, such as Head Start, and early intervention programs, such as the Abecedarian Project and Project Giant Step, have made consistent efforts to establish links with the schools that their "graduates" will attend.

But despite the effectiveness of these efforts, few districts or elementary schools initiate systematic efforts to adopt them. In a national survey, only 10 percent of schools reported systematic communication between kindergarten teachers and their pupils' previous caregivers or teachers; 12 percent said that their kindergarten curricula were designed to build on preschool programs.[13] The vast majority of our elementary schools have no formal policy governing activities aimed at strengthening continuity and easing transitions from early care and education programs.

In most cases, there are benefits from even a relatively small investment of time or resources spent on developing transitions. Finding out where children have spent their preschool years is a logical first step as part of the kindergarten intake process. Some schools compile a list of feeder programs (including family care homes, when possible), contact their directors or caregivers, and plan transition activities appropriate to the community. Caregivers, primary-grade teachers, and others would benefit from exchanges of information and ideas (especially regarding child development, curriculum, and assessment), visits to each others' classrooms, joint training and special projects or events, and collaborative curriculum development. Research shows that such efforts hinge on the involvement and support of principals and district-level administrators, as well as others in the community. Schools have more and better contact with preschools when specific school staff are assigned responsibility for transition activities.[14]

States and school districts also have a role to play in creating a context for improved early childhood transition services. Some districts are integrating training for professionals who work across the 3-to-8-year-old age span, and some states now certify teachers to work with children in the preschool years or primary grades. Further steps might include: promoting and supporting transition projects; taking a broader view of early childhood assessment practices; reconsidering the licensing, training, and compensation plans of all early childhood teachers; and facilitating collaboration among preschool and elementary school programs on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.[15]

3. Ready schools help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world.

Ready schools help children master literacy, numeracy, and other skills and use their knowledge to make sense of their world. Ready schools recognize that self-esteem stems from competence—from students doing tasks that are engaging and challenging, and gaining the ability to solve problems with what they have learned.

- **Curriculum and instruction**
  Ready schools may take diverse instructional approaches and all be ready for students. Many models can work if they are applied consistently and completely. Several approaches to beginning reading instruction, for example, have solid track records, especially when they emphasize phonemic awareness and balance both decoding skills and reading for meaning. The key factor is that curriculum and instruction are informed by research and help students reach high standards. This entails ensuring a high quality of instruction, maintaining an appropriate level of instruction, reinforcing incentives for learning, and using time effectively.[16]

- **Quality of instruction**
  Ready schools offer a high quality of instruction. The questions teachers ask, the discussions they encourage, and the books and software they use make sense to students. Information is presented in an organized and orderly way; students find it interesting and easy to remember and apply. Transitions to new topics are clear. Teachers use language that is simple and clear, and they offer vivid images and examples. Lessons are related to students' background knowledge, and essential principles are often repeated. Lesson objectives are clear to students. There are frequent formal or informal checks to see that students understand what is being taught, as well as prompt feedback to students on how they are doing.

- **Appropriate levels (pace and content) of instruction**
  Children have been shown to learn best when material is new to them but within their reach, and they are provided the support of teachers or peers. Both cross-age and peer tutoring can increase academic achievement of the tutors and tutees. We know that content coverage is strongly related to children's achievement, so it is important for schools to teach what they want children to know; the material taught cannot be haphazard. Frequent assessment of children's learning helps teachers gauge the most appropriate content and pace for instruction.

- **Incentives for learning**
  In a ready school, children are motivated to pay attention, study, and learn because materials seem interesting and valuable and children are encouraged by praise, comments, and feedback on their progress. Teachers can build upon children's own desire to learn by making material engaging, relating it to their

prior knowledge and interests, and actively involving them in using new skills and knowledge. Even when the hard work involved in learning is evident, teachers increase children's motivation and achievement by setting high expectations, communicating confidence in their ability to learn, and offering prompt and specific feedback on both the quality and substance of children's work.

- **Effective use of time**
  Researchers have looked closely at schools that serve low-income communities, enroll many immigrants, or have few resources, that is, schools that face great challenges. A consistent feature of success in these schools is their ability to engage students so that all children spend most of their time absorbed in purposeful activities that support their learning.[17] More time spent on teaching does not always translate into additional learning, but if instructional quality, appropriateness of instruction, and incentives for learning are all high, then more teaching time is likely to pay off in greater learning.

  Teachers in ready schools tend to use effective classroom management techniques, such as avoiding "down time;" establishing smooth routines; reducing time spent on discipline; creating an engaging, productive, supportive classroom climate; and engaging students in varied and interesting learning tasks. Subject matter is appropriately rigorous and may be integrated through children's work on projects. Ready schools minimize interruptions and distractions.

  A ready school's curriculum is not fragmented. A science project, such as caring for caterpillars, may also encompass mathematics, art, and social studies. There are ample opportunities for creative expression through art, drama, dance, music, and literature. Children devote most of their time to experiences that rouse their curiosity and encourage them both to frame questions and engage in activities that will help them answer those questions. Ready schools help children draw connections between day-to-day experiences in their homes and communities and what they learn in school.

- **Learning in the context of relationships**
  Children construct knowledge about the world and learn skills through social interactions; they learn to "make meaning" from their dialogues and mutual adjustment with adults and older children. This process is the foundation for learning, because human relationships are a critical element in children's development. The ready school rests its curriculum and instruction on this principle. Collaborative work, work in small groups, teamwork, shared-interest groups, and peer coaching can all supplement whole-group instruction and individual work.

In particular, ready schools foster bonding between teachers and students, recognizing that in many communities the differences between teachers and children—cultural, racial, and linguistic—may be wider than ever before. Because children are less likely than ever before to live in the same neighborhood as their teachers, some schools decide to keep groups of young children together with the same teacher for more than one year in order to solidify relationships; give children, parents, and teachers the comfort and pleasure of being well known; and lend greater continuity to the effort to develop every child's social, ethical, and emotional potential, as well as his or her intellectual and physical competencies.

4. Ready schools are committed to the success of every child.

Ready schools expect children to arrive at their doorsteps in varying stages of readiness. Ready schools are demanding, but they build into their organization and curriculum sufficient flexibility to respond to dramatic variations within a class, and to meet the changing needs of individual children over time. They introduce curricula and teaching methods that are "ready" for children—that are open, flexible, and engaging.

- **Responsiveness to children's individual needs**
  Efforts to raise achievement depend, in part, on a school's capacity to provide intensive help when it is needed. This requires having on tap well-qualified, well-informed individuals—tutors, health professionals, technology specialists, etc.—who can provide instruction, coaching, resources, and support to individual children and their families, especially those who are running into either academic or out-of-school problems. Schools may offer tutors or other extra teaching help to ensure steady academic progress. Other child and family concerns can be addressed by social services professionals either on the school's staff or working in local community organizations, social service agencies, or youth groups. Schools may also make use of volunteers from the community, such as parents or grandparents.

  The capacity to provide help on an individual basis can be particularly important for children who are having trouble mastering reading skills. School leaders may want to rally their communities around helping children read well by publicizing and supporting initiatives to help improve reading. They may want to recruit tutors from the ranks of college work-study students, college students doing community service, and other partnerships. Schools may offer after-school, weekend, or summer tutoring programs to help students who need extra assistance.

  While volunteers can be very effective tutors, classroom aides, and leaders of extracurricular activities, sustained efforts to raise achievement also require paid professional staff. Some critical services usually require the services of specialists as well, such as nurses, computer specialists, or librarians. Initiatives

that provide more individualized attention to students can be costly, but schools may be able to provide them by taking advantage of already funded community services or by reallocating monies from programs that have less promise for improving results. Moreover, intensive efforts to raise achievement and prevent failure may, in the long run, cut special education costs and reduce retention rates, thus allowing schools to recoup their investments.

- **An environment conducive to learning and exploration**
  A ready school provides a physical setting that is both safe and appropriate for the children's level of development, ensuring children's physical and emotional security, stimulating their imaginations and intellects, and meeting their changing needs over time. These are settings where children can learn together or on their own, with guidance or coaching, as needed, from adults. Young children also need interesting materials and objects around them. This may mean sand and water, or slides and swings, or compact discs and computers. Whatever the technology, children should have a variety of ways to explore new concepts and master new skills, indoors and out.

  A ready school may not be new, but it is clean and well maintained, and its classrooms are interesting, attractive places. In the schoolyard, children can run, climb, dig, roll in the grass, or hold a pretend birthday party. Classrooms burst with colorful examples of children's work, charts, graphs, household items, and different kinds of print. They allow for many activities by individuals or small groups. There are several adult-sized chairs in the classroom so that parents, visiting teachers, and other support staff can feel at home. Making room for parents, literally, reflects the priority that the school places on the home-school partnership.

  All children benefit from pleasant, cozy settings, but especially children whose day-to-day lives are stressful. They need attractive learning environments and spaces that afford a measure of intimacy. In general, smaller schools are more appropriate for all children in the primary grades; children who need a great deal of care may suffer in large institutional settings. Educators have different ideas about the optimal size for an elementary school setting, but a good rule of thumb is that it should be small enough to allow all of the children, teachers, and staff to know each other's names. In cases where larger facilities are used, smaller units (schools within schools) may be helpful.

- **Ongoing awareness of the impact of poverty and race**
  Because both race and economic status affect the quality of education available to students, issues of equity are of particular concern in the primary grades, even though elementary schools are more likely than high schools to be homogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.[18] This is because young children are more likely than their older brothers and sisters to attend schools in their immediate neighborhoods.[19]

Meeting the demands of elementary school can be rigorous for all children; for those from racial and ethnic minorities, the hurdles may be especially high. When there is a wide gulf between the culture of the home and the culture of the school, teachers can easily misread students' aptitudes, abilities, or intentions.[20] Today, children are less likely than ever before to live in the same neighborhoods as their teachers. Unless children are helped to understand the differences between the assumptions and interactional patterns they meet at home and those they encounter at school, they may despair of succeeding in the classroom. Some may begin to act as if they considered school irrelevant and unimportant. One prominent scholar has suggested that as early as the age of eight, some of these children give up on school.[21]

Research shows that elementary schools in low-income communities differ in many respects from schools in more affluent communities. Many factors—including staff characteristics, available resources, scheduling, the availability of before- and after-school programs, parent involvement, and school climate—may be affected.

In some cases, schools in low-income communities have access to supplementary resources. For example, they are more likely than other schools to have funding for full-day kindergartens. They sometimes have access to funds earmarked for better coordination with feeder preschools. But these benefits should not be overestimated. In general, schools in low-income areas have fewer resources than those in more wealthy communities, and have less to spend on the education of each individual child. Of all the children in our nation's schools, poor children—no matter what their race or ethnicity—are least likely to profit from traditional schooling. They are the most likely to be placed in low academic tracks and the most likely to be held back in the same grade for more than one year.[22]

Socioeconomic factors affect not only spending and resource levels, they also have a clear impact on perceptions of children's readiness for school. In a national study, most school respondents reported that fewer than 10 percent of their incoming children have difficulty adjusting to kindergarten, while schools in low-income communities report that from 10 to 19 percent of their children have difficulty meeting the academic demands of kindergarten.[23] Children in low-income schools also have more difficulty meeting the behavioral expectations of their kindergarten teachers. These findings are consistent with the fact that fewer children entering low-income schools have experienced some type of formal pre-kindergarten program.[24]

Other studies suggest that teachers in low-income schools have different and lower expectations of their children. Researchers have found powerful evidence that teachers' negative perceptions of low-income or minority children—including such factors as their appearance, language style,

and family income—have a strong and lasting effect on their school achievement.[25] All kindergartners need help in understanding and acquiring the specific skills that underlie day-to-day success in their new classrooms, such as how to get a teacher's attention appropriately, ask and answer questions, and master a wide range of classroom routines. But according to one study, kindergarten teachers in low-income schools are less likely to provide this kind of coaching.[26]

When administrators, teachers, or other school staff have low expectations of students, children may be locked permanently into services and performance levels that label them and jeopardize their futures. Public Agenda, an organization that surveys national opinion on educational issues, has reported that "in focus groups, elementary school teachers worry that children will be pigeonholed too early."[27] For example, children in schools with high minority enrollments are more likely to be perceived as needing special education services. In particular, African American boys are more likely than other children to receive special education. Principals and other administrators need to pay close attention to these trends within their own schools and districts, in order to analyze how misperceptions and low expectations may affect placement decisions for any program that involves tracking or homogeneous grouping.

- **The capacity to meet special needs in regular classrooms whenever possible** Ready schools have high expectations for children with disabilities, just as they do for all children. They ensure that every child who is eligible for special education services has access to them, in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law marked an historic moment in American education. Little more than 20 years ago, more than one million children with disabilities were not receiving any public education, and another 3.5 million did not receive appropriate programs within public schools.[28] IDEA requires placement of children with disabilities in the least restrictive, appropriate setting—often a regular classroom.

In this way, IDEA defines special education not as a "place," but as a set of services aimed at helping every child benefit from instruction. Many children benefit from the special services—instruction, curricula, materials, and therapies—that are prescribed for them in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). But special educators are concerned that the expectations set for many children with disabilities have been too low.[29] Today, more and more children who receive special education are being served in "inclusion" settings—regular classrooms whose resources have been modified or augmented to allow children with disabilities to participate successfully in them. Research shows that in such settings, special needs children make somewhat greater academic and social gains than their peers in self-contained special education classrooms.[30]

Special educators point out that in good inclusion settings, everybody benefits. Children with disabilities participate fully in the life of the classroom and the school; at the same time, their classmates learn to help others and to be more compassionate and caring.

Ready schools ensure that all teachers have the professional development and support needed to meet the needs of every child in their classrooms, including those with disabilities. They base policy and placement decisions on the premise that no child should ever be assigned to a classroom where the teacher is not equipped to address his or her special needs or where necessary supports are not provided. Principals and district administrators can take a number of steps to achieve the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classrooms, such as fostering stronger relationships between special educators and regular classroom teachers; organizing joint training and collaborative curriculum development; ensuring that annual evaluations of special education students provide information that teachers and parents can use to provide appropriate services and make sound decisions for individual children; and creating stronger partnerships with parents.

- **Ensuring language minority children age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, challenging curriculum and instruction**

Nationwide, the number of limited English proficient children has nearly doubled in the past decade, and the growth is expected to continue. Across the nation, states and school districts have adopted a wide range of policies concerning the language of instruction in the primary grades. Each must comply with the 1973 Supreme Court decision that required schools to help limited English proficient students understand the curriculum, but allowed schools to use a variety of strategies to achieve this goal. By law, parents also have the right to decline to enroll their children in federally funded bilingual education programs.

Whatever approach they choose, ready schools elicit and take into account parents' preferences and values; show respect for children's cultures and appreciation of their linguistic accomplishments; and find ways to help language minority children learn in two languages so that they can master challenging, age-appropriate curriculum.[31] Decisions about language use in the classroom should take into consideration student and community characteristics, but should also reflect research on bilingual education. This research shows that most children can pick up conversational or "playground" English in a year or two, but may need more time to master "academic" English, regardless of whether they take part in bilingual education programs or learn in English-only classrooms.[32]

5. Ready schools are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day.

Ready schools give teachers time to improve their skills and develop their craft. A qualified teaching staff and effective, ongoing professional development are the foundation of ready schools. As a recent study noted, "what teachers know and do is the most important influence on what students learn."[13] A large-scale study of school reform efforts, encompassing more than a thousand school districts, showed recently that every additional dollar spent on more highly qualified teachers produced more gains in student achievement than any other single expenditure.[14]

Today, there is growing awareness of, and respect for, the intellectual challenges of early childhood education. A growing body of research repudiates the commonly held misconception that teachers of young children need little formal education and training. More schools of education are requiring future elementary school teachers to take a substantial number of credits in the liberal arts and sciences, to select an area of concentration in one of those disciplines, and/or to pursue a double major.

There are other changes as well in the field of elementary education. For the first time, national standards of excellence have been established for master teachers. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, an independent, nonpartisan group of teaching professionals, has developed standards for highly accomplished teachers, including early childhood specialists. Many states are introducing more rigorous requirements for teaching licenses. These are promising trends. However, many school leaders remain concerned about the quality of their faculties—present and future—and wonder how they will be able to recruit and attract exceptional teachers in coming years. Over the next decade, as enrollments rise and many teachers retire, the nation will need a record two million new teachers.[15]

Professional development lies at the heart of education reform, particularly when it is firmly rooted in research, when it is directed toward solving the real problems faced by real teachers, and when it enhances a shared vision for a particular school.

To raise the quality of their teaching force, present and future, school leaders can:

1. Give teachers ongoing opportunities for professional development, including the time and tools they need to strengthen curriculum, instruction, and learning in their classrooms.

2. Encourage teachers to pursue their own academic study, and to share their knowledge and skills with colleagues and students.

3. Launch mentoring programs that team new teachers or student teachers with experienced, highly qualified teachers.

4. Initiate programs that actively recruit talented young people and mid-career professionals to become teachers.

5. Encourage interdisciplinary collaborations.

6. Work with colleges to reinvent teacher preparation for beginning teachers, including an "induction" period for their beginning years of teaching.

7. Participate in efforts under way in many states to develop performance-based assessments for new teachers, such as those of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium.

8. Encourage master teachers to become Nationally Board Certified.

9. Provide peer assistance programs to improve the performance of burnt-out or low-performing teachers.

10. Expand efforts to help teachers become more technologically literate, and use technology to improve training available to teachers.

11. Seek better ways to get current information and hands-on help to teachers, addressing the isolation that is all too common in teaching.

Compared with teachers in other developed nations, American teachers have very little time to prepare lessons, work with colleagues, or improve their skills. In most European and Asian countries, teachers spend three or more hours of a typical school day planning, learning, or practicing new methods, and working with colleagues, as well as parents and students. In contrast, most U.S. elementary school teachers have three or fewer hours per week for these activities.[56]

In the realm of professional development, much more could be done to coordinate policy and practice so that preschool and elementary school programs could benefit from each other's knowledge and experience. The field of early care and education has long been committed to hands-on, child-directed learning activities geared to children's individual developmental trajectories; in many elementary schools, primary-grade instruction could benefit from this orientation. At the same time, preschool programs could profit from the emphasis on challenging content that characterizes the best elementary school classrooms.[57]

Ready schools include staff from feeder preschools in their professional development activities. A key to improving the quality of early care and education programs, and thereby strengthening school readiness, is to expand training and education opportunities for caregivers.[58] Research shows that the more training and preparation that early care and education practitioners have, the more skilled they become at helping young children get ready for the demands of elementary school. For example, when practitioners are better educated and attend more training, the children in their care tend to engage in more complex play.[59] Despite these benefits, across the nation training requirements for early care and education practitioners are sparse, and professional development opportunities are limited. Center-based teachers receive only about ten hours of ongoing training annually, typically at their own centers or at community colleges.[60] By organizing joint workshops that bring together primary-grade and preschool teachers, and by facilitating visits to each other's classrooms, elementary schools can contribute to the readiness of their future kindergartners and, at the same time, work toward a better transition between preschool programs and the early elementary grades.

Both preschool and elementary schools need more opportunities to learn and practice effective strategies for working with the diverse children they encounter in their classrooms, especially language minority and special education children. In particular, most teachers who work in inclusion settings need more support and assistance. As reauthorized in 1997, IDEA places new responsibilities on regular classroom teachers, requiring, for example, that they take part in all meetings where IEPs for their students with disabilities are discussed and created. Professional development activities should be planned to help teachers meet these responsibilities.

Most school administrators appreciate the importance of professional development, but the way that schools now operate, it is notoriously difficult to wedge into the school day. Ready schools use creative scheduling and team-teaching strategies to free up time so that teachers can acquire, practice, adapt, and disseminate effective teaching methods geared to their particular children.[41] Ready schools make effective use of professional development resources to help teachers promote children's development and strengthen their learning.

Professional development is too often a "hard sell." Without substantial education and public outreach, taxpayers may not grasp the relevance of these expenditures to their children or their community. Ready schools share such information and take care to involve parents and communities in professional development activities in order to clarify how their children will benefit, to get feedback, and to ensure that there is "buy-in" before launching or expanding new efforts. They may offer workshops for parents and community members as well.

Finally, ready schools are committed to strong relationships with the teacher education programs at the institutions of higher education in their area. When they work with schools of education by providing placements for student teachers, they forge ongoing partnerships. In this way, they help to ground the school of education's curriculum and instruction in the realities of the day-to-day life of their school; at the same time, they tap the knowledge and expertise of the professors who are coming to their schools to supervise student teachers. In many cases, student teacher placements can lead to an ongoing collaboration between colleges or universities and schools, tied to the school's own change agenda.

Ready schools foster teamwork, creating opportunities for teachers to observe, discuss, and try out new roles in ways that preserve their own sense of competence. As they shape and implement their own reform agendas, ready schools involve teachers on a continual basis, and use teachers' feedback to remove impediments to success. Finally, ready schools hail teachers' and students' successes, celebrating milestones on the way to the attainment of larger goals.

6. Ready schools introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement.

Research over the last two decades has produced convincing evidence that some education strategies are consistently effective. Educators know more than ever before about boosting achievement and preventing school failure, based on both research evidence and practical experience from programs and schools that have established strong records of success. Some approaches have been shown to work, or not work, with particular groups of students, such as those at risk of academic failure. Ready schools take advantage of promising strategies, such as:

- **Prompt and supportive intervention**
  Research shows that prompt, supportive, and intensive intervention can brighten the prospects of children who are falling behind in the primary grades. Some researchers have concluded that all children who are showing signs of falling behind—including all those who are not beginning to read by the end of the first grade—should receive immediate and targeted help.[42]

  Primary-grade children who are encountering academic difficulty can benefit significantly from one-to-one tutoring. Of course, tutoring is labor-intensive, since it requires close monitoring of students' progress and frequent contact among teachers, tutors, and parents. While it requires additional expenditures in the early grades, tutoring can also produce savings in the long run by substantially reducing special education and other remediation costs. Early identification of learning problems and investment in prevention efforts can also prevent student frustration from building up, resulting in safer, more orderly schools.[43]

  Some elementary schools have used Title I funds, other grants, or monies generated by reallocating existing resources, to support comprehensive schoolwide restructuring programs, such as Success For All or New American School designs. Based on extensive research, these approaches encompass intensive instruction in the early grades, curricular change, and family support services. Their intent is to ensure that all children master basic skills, particularly reading, the first time they are taught, rather than relying on remedial services later.[44]

- **Parent involvement**
  Parents are children's first and most important teachers. A key to success for any early childhood program is meaningful parent involvement. This does not change when children enter elementary school. Effective schools go beyond traditional parent activities such as fundraising and parent-teacher conferences. Mindful of parents' busy lives, they offer paths to involvement that are realistic and convenient, making it clear that family members are

welcome to participate in whatever way they prefer and can best manage. Such schools recognize the diversity of their students' households, reinforce the importance of the learning that occurs at home, and communicate respect for all kinds of families.

Research has also demonstrated modest effectiveness for programs that help mothers and fathers gain the skills they need to become full partners in their children's schooling. Not only do large-scale parent-education programs such as Even Start stress family literacy, but local efforts can also make a difference.[45] To ensure successful parent involvement, principals and district administrators can ensure that their schools respond to the diversity of their children's families and cultures. They can also reach out to local employers, encouraging them to adopt policies that help parents balance the responsibilities of work and family life, and cooperating with them when they introduce initiatives that give employees the time they need to attend teacher conferences and other school activities.

- **Flexible approaches to school and classroom organization, staffing, and grouping**
  Ready schools monitor the success of various approaches to classroom organization, staffing, and grouping. They retain and expand the approaches that benefit their children.

Class size. Research shows that primary-grade children can benefit significantly when class size is reduced from an average of 25 to an average of 15. In one 4-year, large-scale study, small class size improved the performance of all children, including low-income and minority students and those in inner-city schools. The benefits for minority students were even greater than for other students. Moreover, the benefits of reduced class size persisted through Grade 5 even when class size increased significantly in Grades 4 and 5.[46] These benefits, of course, hinge not only on having fewer students in the class, but also on the teacher's effective use of instructional strategies that take advantage of the reduced class size.

Reducing class size is a strategy that has great appeal for teachers and parents alike. It holds the promise of greater individual attention and a more supportive, individually responsive atmosphere. Some researchers contend, however, that small class size, while desirable, is very expensive and may not yield as much benefit, in terms of achievement, as individual, targeted assistance for those young children who are falling behind.[47] Some schools may want to consider making this trade-off.

Classroom staffing. In some districts and schools, including those with large language-minority enrollments, adding paraprofessionals to primary-grade classrooms has proved effective; in others, decision-makers have found that they get a better return when they invest in more professional development for classroom teachers.

Mixed-age grouping. Some schools have found that young children fare better in mixed-age groupings. This concept of nongraded elementary schools was introduced—or, more accurately, reintroduced—to American education in the late fifties by educators who believed that age was a crude indicator of children's readiness for various kinds of classroom experiences. More recently, some educators have made the case that a 2- or 3-year age span in the early years takes into account the wide range of competencies both among classmates and within a single individual (who may be "ahead" in some areas of development and "behind" in others). Multi-age groupings may minimize feelings of inadequacy arising from same-age peer group comparisons, help teachers resist the temptation to teach the same thing the same way at the same time to all members of the group, and allow all members of the group to help each other.[48] Critics of this strategy point out that younger children may be overwhelmed by older children whose skills are better developed.

- **Research and dissemination**

There is a strong need for more research and design, evaluation, and dissemination of effective practices. In *Building Knowledge for a Nation of Learners: A Framework for Education Research 1997*, the U.S. Department of Education has elaborated priorities for research, based on the deliberations of the National Educational Research Policy and Priorities Board.[49] A number of key questions on this research agenda relate to improving school readiness, designing effective practices, and bridging the gap between research and practice. The Board recognized that not only traditional researchers, but also school administrators, classroom teachers, parents, and community members have important roles to play in expanding knowledge about effective practices.

7. Ready schools are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children.

Many districts and schools continue to make use of strategies that have not consistently promoted their children's development or learning, and have failed to show lasting benefits in research studies. It is often difficult to eliminate such practices or policies, but in many cases, schools have been able to fund very effective programs or services by cutting ineffective ones. The following four practices are prime examples:

- **Retention and extra-year programs**
  Well over half of the schools surveyed in the National Transition Study (61 percent) routinely retain kindergarten children.[50] About five percent of kindergartners in those schools are held back—an average of one per classroom. The great majority of elementary schools (73 percent) either retain children in kindergarten or place them in transition classes for an extra year either before or after kindergarten. In these schools, 18 percent of kindergartners are assigned an extra year of schooling. Data show that low-income minority students, especially males, have the highest rate of retention. Language-minority students are more likely than native speakers of English to be held back. Since expenditures for each public school student now average well over $6,000 per year, retention and extra-year programs are extremely expensive strategies.

  Critics argue that the funds spent on such programs might better be used to provide early diagnosis and intensive intervention and tutoring. Such early help would be pedagogically sound. In most cases, retention means more of the same kind of teaching and is unlikely to spark achievement. Instead, a different, more focused, more individualized intervention has a better chance of putting a low-achieving student on track for success. Wherever possible, children should not be retained.

- **Redshirting**
  For decades, most first graders have been 6 years old, but this trend is changing. In 1972, one in eight first graders was age 7 or older; in 1994, the figure was one in five. This reflects not only the increasing rate of retention and extra-year programs, but also a trend for parents to elect to keep 5-year-olds at home or in preschool for an extra year.

  Today, many parents delay kindergarten entry for their children—particularly middle-class and wealthy parents, for whom an extra year of preschool or day care is not a hardship. This practice is known as redshirting. Many parents, especially parents of boys, assume that at age 6, a child will be better prepared for success in kindergarten—more mature socially, cognitively, and physically. On the other hand, low-income and working-class parents, including the vast majority of parents of color, are less likely to delay their

children's kindergarten enrollment. These 5-year-olds may enter kindergarten with the 6-year-olds of more prosperous parents—children from homes that are more closely aligned with the culture of the school, who already have a firmer grasp of the rules of the game. Thus the social and educational gap widens.

Delaying kindergarten entry may have negative as well as positive effects on the children involved, according to a recent study published in *Pediatrics*.[51] The long-term study of more than nine thousand students showed that children who start school late show higher rates of behavioral problems later in their school careers. These problems were not apparent in the primary grades, but became very evident in the middle and high school years.

- **Denying school entry**

School districts around the nation have set their own guidelines for age of kindergarten entry—most at age 5. Some make individual decisions about school entry based on assessments of children's development. Ready schools accept *all* children on the basis of chronological age. They assume that any group of 5-year-olds will exhibit a wide range of developmental traits; they do not exclude children or delay their entry on the basis of tests or interviews. They may conduct assessments in order to facilitate planning or assess individual strengths and weaknesses, but not to determine school eligibility.

Like redshirting, denying school entry is unfair and unnecessary. Schools committed to meeting children at the level of their own development and taking into account variations among children and among the diverse competencies of each individual child, do not feel a need to deny children school entry. Ready schools admit and serve all children when they reach the chronological age set by the district for school entry.

- **"Pushing down" or "hothousing"**

These terms refer to an approach that stresses accelerating academic instruction of young children at younger and younger ages. In particular, "pushing down" refers to pushing down the first-grade curriculum into the kindergarten classroom.

Some researchers suggest that this approach undermines the social and academic development of young children because the presentation of letter and number facts are typically decontextualized and not connected to children's real lives. Nevertheless, kindergarten education continues to increase academic demands, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged students. In these settings, an accelerated kindergarten program may be seen by parents, administrators, and teachers as a way to prevent future failure. To date, there have been few systematic studies of this approach, and little is known about its long-term effects.[52] However, the prevailing view is that young children learn in the context of relationships, and benefit from curricula and classroom practices rich in experiential learning, play, and social experience.[53]

8. Ready schools serve children in communities.

Ready schools recognize that schools alone cannot meet the broad spectrum of children's and families' needs. Children are more likely to make a successful adjustment to school when they have easy access to a range of services and supports in their community. Adequate health care and nutrition are especially vital to children's well-being and success in school.

In some cases, schools become hubs of health and human services, making the school one of a family's major ties with its community.[54] In other cases, other organizations—such as community-based organizations or religious institutions—may be well positioned to connect families to services, and can free schools to concentrate on their educational mission. Communities can also form new collaboratives to provide a range of children and family services.[55]

Many arrangements can work, so long as children and their families can easily learn about and arrange for the support services they need. The key point is that ready schools are extensions of communities. To be rooted in a sense of neighborhood and community is important at any age, but perhaps especially in the early years, when children make the long and daring leap from home to school, and from the culture of the home to the culture of the school.[56]

Linkages with the neighborhood and community may take several forms. They may be infused into the curricula, at every level and in every discipline. They may be reflected in the parents' strong role and decision-making power in many aspects of school life. In ready schools, children see their parents and neighbors being treated with respect; they see parents and other community members as natural partners in school life.

Ready schools also maintain ongoing, two-way relationships with social service and health agencies, making appropriate referrals and following up on them. They work together with community-based organizations, particularly those that sponsor before-school, after-school, or weekend programs for young children and their families. They collaborate with cultural institutions, such as libraries or museums, to enrich the school's curriculum.

In short, ready schools do not function as islands unto themselves. They maintain contacts and establish pragmatic, task-oriented partnerships or coalitions with other service providers, including schools and other learning organizations, within the community and beyond. Their teachers work collaboratively with professors of nearby schools of education, to learn or adapt pedagogical approaches based on the most recent research. Increasingly, schools may use telecommunications and other technologies to achieve these linkages. In these ways, they help students, parents, and teachers perceive themselves as part of a larger community, prepared to collaborate and compete in a global society.

9. Ready schools take responsibility for results.

Ready schools challenge every child. They may set different standards for different children, reflecting different rates of development, but they do not excuse children from success. They set high standards for all children, and commit themselves to zero failure. Holding themselves accountable for the success of each individual student, they provide immediate, targeted assistance for those who show signs of falling behind.

For this reason, assessing student learning and providing extra help when it is needed are crucial activities in the ready school. Informal teacher observations of student learning are very important for identifying who may benefit from extra help within the classroom.

Ready schools assess children not only to help teachers and parents meet their children's needs, but also to stay accountable to their communities. They disseminate information about their mission and curricular goals. They share information about the progress of individual children with parents on a routine basis. And they make schoolwide data available to the community. For these purposes, assessment becomes a crucial activity in the ready school.

But young children are notoriously difficult to assess. Standard paper-and-pencil tests are usually inappropriate for boys and girls who are just learning to hold a pencil comfortably. The assessment of young minority children is particularly difficult. Some researchers question whether tests actually measure what they are purporting to measure when administered to children who are not white and middle-class.[37] Ready schools organize testing and screening strategies that are fair and valid and do not, intentionally or unintentionally, devalue cultural differences. Such assessments may not be readily available, so many schools continue to rely on the inadequate assessment methods.

The challenge is to develop assessment practices that are aligned with the curriculum, honor the ways that young children learn, and look at a wide range of behaviors and intellectual competencies. No single test can provide this kind of information, and today researchers and classroom teachers are finding that alternative assessments, including guided observation of children (by teachers *and* parents), and a structured review of their projects and their performance, are ways to get useful, comprehensive information about each child's growth.

As they review their assessment practices, schools need to consider new strategies, including those that take advantage of emerging technologies. Practitioners of dynamic assessment, for example, have made use of an interactive format to challenge thinking and reasoning, strengthen cognitive functions, and elicit higher-order thinking skills for students who have not thrived when tested, placed, and educated in the context of more traditional models. Whatever methods are used, ready schools examine whether they are reaching their instructional goals and attaining the standards they set for their students.

10. Ready schools have strong leadership.

None of the principles summarized in this report are likely to be adopted or sustained without a vision and active support by strong, articulate school leaders. Ready schools have a clear and unmistakable source of leadership that provides instructional focus and coherence to the many activities and efforts under way in many classrooms.

Many leadership styles and arrangements are effective. Leadership may be vested in one individual or shared. The crucial element is that the leader or leaders have an agenda: they are guided by a vision of education that is responsive to the needs of the children and their community, informed by research and dedicated to the proposition that all children can learn to high standards. The school leadership makes a clear, consistent, public commitment to an achievable set of instructional priorities; guides the faculty in collaborative problem-solving and staff development geared to these priorities; welcomes parents into the collaborative process; and takes responsibility for creating a climate conducive to success. The content of the agenda is less important than the focus, targeted effort, and collaboration that it provides.

Leaders in ready schools have the authority to make decisions and exercise discretion, usually in the context of site-based management. However, this discretion will not mean much if the school leader controls a negligible portion of the school's budget. Leadership must include discretion to use resources to meet goals for children, as well as accountability for decisions.

Leaders need to be visible and accessible—to children, parents, and community members. They must set clear priorities and avoid distraction, so that they can spend significant portions of their days focusing on issues directly tied to children's learning and teachers' growth. And finally, school leaders teach and mentor others, in and out of the school building, who have the ability and will to become educational leaders.

There are many ways that communities have created ready schools. The strengths and special characteristics of a community will determine how its schools evolve and which qualities and practices they stress. The faculty, students, families, and business and community leaders all are critical to deciding what to do and how to monitor success. The Ready Schools Resource Group believes that the ten keys recommended here are sound principles to bear in mind, and that they lead logically to a set of questions that communities can ask to help assess where they are and where they want to go. Part III presents a set of questions pertaining to each of the ten principles described in this report.

Part III. Questions to Consider: A Self-Inventory for Ready Schools

Key 1. Ready schools smooth the transition between home and school.

- Do families and children have an opportunity to visit the school and meet the teacher and principal prior to the first day of school?
- Does every teacher have a method for learning about each incoming child's background, talents, and interests, such as a structured intake process, home visits, parent conferences, or other "getting acquainted" activities?
- Is the school environment warm, safe, and inviting for a young child?
- Do families have opportunities for meaningful participation in the life of the school?
- Does the school effectively accommodate the language, culture, and special needs of the children it serves?

Key 2. Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.

- Have the kindergarten staff/faculty had opportunities to visit neighborhood preschools and child care centers to discuss their philosophy, pedagogy, and expectations for children and families?
- Are there formal transition activities planned with the neighborhood preschools, child care centers, and Head Start programs?
- Have ongoing mechanisms and professional development opportunities been established to link the school to preschool programs?
- Are school staff involved in early childhood professional organizations or associations?

Key 3. Ready schools help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world.

- Do learning activities give children opportunities to become engaged over time in purposeful, meaningful work?
- Does the subject matter emerge in a way that is engaging, relevant, and meaningful to the children?
- Does the curriculum reflect what is known about how young children learn and the types of experiences that can help them make sense of their world?
- Does the curriculum help students meet high standards for what they should know and be able to do?
- Are themes, projects, or integrated units used as organizing frameworks for the curriculum?

Key 4. Ready schools are committed to the success of every child.

- Do teachers consistently communicate high expectations for all students?
- Does every child have at least one caring adult at the school site who takes a special interest in him or her?
- Is timely help available, on an individual basis, for any student who experiences academic or social problems?
- Are multiple sources of information available and consulted regarding each child's development, achievement, and educational strengths and needs?
- Are parents' perspectives taken into consideration as goals for individual children are developed?

Key 5. Ready schools are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day.

- Is there a coherent, systematic professional development program geared to the specific needs of the students and the school?
- Do teachers have regular time for team meetings within and across grade levels, and with preschool and early childhood teachers?
- Do teachers have in-classroom mentors—colleagues with whom they can work to develop and practice effective teaching practices?
- Is the effectiveness of staff development activities evaluated on a regular basis?

Key 6. Ready schools introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement.

- Are staff and faculty familiar with educational research that relates directly to the specific challenges they face in their work with children?
- Are there flexible grouping patterns within classrooms and across grade levels?
- Are teachers using instructional strategies that take advantage of, or make the best of, class size—whether small or large?
- Does the school maintain a collaborative relationship with a university or community college or participate in outside education initiatives to share expertise and improve teaching and learning?
- Do school administrators regularly document, review, and share evidence of student achievement? Do achievement data inform decision-making?

Key 7. Ready schools are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children.

- Does the school routinely monitor student success for individuals, subgroups, and the school as a whole; alter practices and programs that are not effective; and provide supportive interventions for students and professional development opportunities for adults?

- Is the curriculum able to accommodate variation in children's abilities, interests, and developmental capabilities?
- Are retention policies and practices reviewed on a regular basis to determine how many—and which—students are retained each year?
- Are students who are considered for retention provided with intensive, individualized assistance?
- Is entry to kindergarten based on chronological age?
- Are retention and redshirting rare?

Key 8. Ready schools serve children in communities.

- Are faculty and staff aware of community resources, and do they use them regularly?
- Does the school maintain regular communication with and participate in related activities sponsored by community organizations, services, and businesses?
- Do community members ever share their expertise and experience with faculty, children, or parents—either at the school or at other sites in the community?
- Is the wider world brought into the school by means of technology?
- Does the community participate in setting instructional goals and helping the school achieve them?

Key 9. Ready schools take responsibility for results.

- Has the school put into place systematic methods—both formal and informal—for assessing progress toward schoolwide goals?
- Are school improvement efforts planned, implemented, and evaluated based on measures of student and school success?
- Are assessment procedures aligned with curriculum and learning goals?
- Does the school share progress with parents, the community, and the greater public on a regular basis?

Key 10. Ready schools have strong leadership.

- Do school leaders have a clearly defined vision of a "ready school" that is committed to the success of every child?
- Do school leaders have regular opportunities to develop and strengthen their own leadership skills?
- Do school leaders seize opportunities to mentor other potential leaders?
- Does the leadership involve faculty, staff, and parents in goal-setting and decision-making whenever appropriate?
- Do school leaders have some training and experience in early childhood education?

Notes

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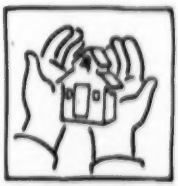

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